

Tech-NO-Nerds: Why the Best Student Computer Lab Consultants are often not from the Computer Science Department

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ABSTRACT

TECHNOLOGY NERDS NEED NOT APPLY! Politically-incorrect? Certainly. But that bold statement ought to be at the top of every Student Computer Lab Consultant university job description in the nation. While a solid technological base is desirable when hiring a computer lab consultant, communication and interpersonal skills are far more crucial than programming expertise. Specialized technical skills such as those typically possessed by Computer Science majors are rarely needed when supporting computer labs, where the principal goal is to provide broad-based software and hardware support that will allow all students, whatever field they are pursuing, to successfully achieve their educational and professional goals. The ability to empathize and share ideas and solutions with clarity, along with the facility to think creatively, are ultimately the factors that make for the best computer lab consultants. Consequently, supervisors should always keep in mind the motto “Tech-NO-Nerds” when considering hiring students to fill public campus computer lab positions.

In this paper, the authors will discuss the commitment of Northwest Missouri State University’s Academic Computing Department to recruit student computer lab consultants from outside the traditional sphere of the Computer Science Department, showcase retention and training methods, and share ideas, practices and techniques for managing and promoting a racially, culturally and academically diverse student workforce.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Computer Science majors do not always make the best computer lab consultants. To some those might just be fighting words, but for Northwest’s Academic Computing (AC) User Consultants it is simply a truth that must be defended against those narrow-minded, digital Ivory-Tower techno-nerds who believe that *only* Computer Science majors have the appropriate skills to be competent computer lab consultants. While knowledge of technology is important, it is far more important for computer lab consultants to be empathetic and articulate in today’s general purpose public computer labs than to know the difference between Java and JavaScript. Consequently, when hiring new students to fill public computer lab positions, Northwest’s AC User Consultants want to urge supervisors to think “outside the box” of the traditional computer lab consultant criteria to find those students who are willing to embrace technology, but do not live and breathe it. In short, think “Tech,” but say “No” to “Nerds” who believe that their verbal communication skills are not as important as their programming [or coding] skills.

2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The public computer labs at Northwest Missouri State University were created in 1978 to serve as general-purpose labs, where students could use computers to complete wide-ranging tasks from spreadsheet creation to basic word processing. Currently, there are three public labs housed in Owens Library with over 140 Windows computers with Windows Operating Systems, eight networked printers, a CD recorder, two scanners and a projector. The majority of the computers offer general-purpose software such as Microsoft Office Professional and Internet Explorer. A limited number of computers in the library labs address specific needs with software such as Visual Basic, Java, Macromedia Dreamweaver, and Photoshop.

The labs are managed by the Academic Computing (AC) Student Computer Lab Consultants. However, the Academic Computing Administrative Office is located within the main computer lab and consequently, the AC Computer Lab Consultants are always under the direct supervision of two full-time professional staff members, the AC User Consultants.

Back in 1978, when the first AC Computer Lab Consultant was hired, there were only a small number of students hired to manage the general-purpose labs. Today, the general-purpose labs are a mixture of male and female students from various educational

departments and ethnicities. Currently, there are seventeen consultants, who speak a total of fifteen languages, including English. The majors for these students include Psychology, Interactive Digital Media, and various business majors such as Management Information Systems, International Business, Finance, and Marketing/Management. Additionally, two of the seventeen students are graduate students who are obtaining a Masters of Business Administration degree and a Masters of Science in Psychology. Three recently hired students have majors in Therapeutic Recreation, Vocal Music Education, and Computer Science. As noted here, the diversity of the AC Computer Lab Consultants is both an educational diversity as well as a cultural diversity.

3. HIRING PRACTICES

The quality and diversity of the AC Computer Lab Consultants are a direct result of the hiring practices employed by the AC User Consultants. Presently, the hiring process is two-pronged. First, the AC Student Computer Lab Consultant aspirants fill out an extensive application, which includes technical expertise questions. After the application period ends, the AC User Consultants conduct interviews with all of the applicants. Interviewing candidates began in 1998, but prior to that time, employees were selected on application merit alone and without the benefit of an in-person interview. Consequently, the hiring process focused primarily on technological skills, and as previously mentioned, the majority of consultants employed were Computer Science majors. Unfortunately, a recurring issue with many of these employees was that while they were knowledgeable about the technological side of the job, they were often ignorant of the interpersonal side of the job. In short, they lacked interpersonal skills. By adding the interview segment to the hiring process, the AC User Consultants were then able to assess not only technical skills, but also the far more crucial interpersonal skills of the applicants. Additionally, the communication skills of the applicants could also be more accurately determined, since many of those who apply are from a broad array of backgrounds, ethnicities, and countries.

4. TRAINING

Since the hiring process now focuses primarily on the interpersonal skills of the applicants, many of the new hires have only a basic knowledge of computer hardware and software. For this reason, the AC User Consultants have instituted several methods for increasing the technological knowledge level of their computer lab consultants in an effort to provide more knowledgeable service to lab patrons.

4.1 MENTORING

“Together we can make a difference” is the AC Computer Lab Consultant motto, and the AC Student Computer Lab Consultant mentoring program is a good way for new employees to learn their job duties. During the majority of the hours that the computer labs are open, two computer lab consultants are scheduled. New hires are always paired with consultants who have worked for Academic Computing for at least one trimester. By pairing new consultants with senior consultants, knowledge of the software, labs, and employee policies can be imparted to the new employee in a peer-to-peer fashion that makes the job learning experience less stressful and helps to cement the bonds of trust and friendship in the working environment. Additionally, if the new consultant is unsure of the answer to a patron question or problem, then the senior consultant

can help the patron while the new employee observes and learns from their peer.

4.2 TRAINING MATERIALS

Because continuing education is an important component of the AC Computer Lab Consultant team, each AC Student Computer Lab Consultant is required to enhance their technical skills and knowledge through the on-going software training provided by the AC User Consultants. As part of their duties, AC Computer Lab Consultants are required to study various computer-related training materials and pass two quizzes per month on the material.

The training materials used by the AC User Consultants are produced by *Custom Guide* (<http://www.CustomGuide.com>), and they cover a variety of software topics. The AC User Consultants decided to focus on Microsoft Windows and the Microsoft Office Professional Suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, Outlook). A tutorial book is offered for each software package.

The Lab Consultants are allowed to study the books and chapters in any order they choose. However, they are expected to complete at least two chapters per month and pass the corresponding quizzes for those chapters. To aid in the completion of these materials, the AC User Consultants allow the Computer Lab Consultants to complete the materials while working. However, if necessary, the lab consultants are expected to use their own time to finish the materials each month.

Failure to comply with the training material standards does result in disciplinary actions. Disciplinary steps range from letters of awareness to termination. The disciplinary procedure is comprised of six steps. For each month a consultant is not compliant with the standards, he or she moves a step down the disciplinary ladder. However, the disciplinary system has been designed with a way for the lab consultants to redeem themselves. If a consultant is compliant for three straight months, then he or she moves a step up the disciplinary ladder. For example, if a student consultant received a Step 1 *Letter of Awareness*, but then was in compliance for three months, the next time the student consultant was not in compliance he or she would receive another Step 1 *Letter of Awareness*.

4.3 BRAIN TEASERS

Beginning in the Spring 2003 trimester, a new training/evaluation tool was implemented by the AC User Consultants. The new tool, known as a Brain Teaser, is a short questionnaire about different aspects of the computer labs, the campus network, common patron questions, and policies and procedures associated with being a computer lab consultant. The first questionnaire was composed of thirty fairly simple, but important questions. The AC User Consultants were surprised by the results. None of the Student Computer Lab Consultants were able to complete the Brain Teaser with a perfect score. The answers given by the lab consultants gave the AC User Consultants some insight as to what areas needed to be addressed in future meetings and training documentation.

Given the amount of valuable information gained from the Brain Teaser questionnaire, the AC User Consultants will continue to use this tool both for feedback and to reinforce critical and important information that the Student Computer Lab Consultants should know about computer lab resources and their job duties within those labs.

5. COMMUNICATION

In addition to training, the AC User Consultants feel that good communication, both between the supervisors and the student employees, as well as among the student employees themselves, is crucial to providing consistent, quality service to the lab patrons. Therefore, the AC User Consultants have implemented two listservs for communication purposes.

The first listserv is used by both the AC User Consultants and the Student Computer Lab Consultants strictly to report any problems with equipment or software in the computer labs. For example, if a floppy drive is not working on one of the computers or a virus has been found on one of the systems, then an email message is sent to the OL Lab Problems listserv indicating what the issue is and which system is having the issue.

The second listserv, AC User Consultants-L, is used primarily for interoffice communication between the Computer Lab Consultants themselves. The lab consultants use the listserv to apprise the team of absences due to illness or other conflicts and to request assistance from fellow coworkers in helping to fill shifts. The lab consultants also reply to the list when accepting the responsibility of substituting for another employee. This listserv also allows the AC User Consultants to notify the Computer Lab Consultants of important issues that affect the workplace, such as policy changes.

6. REWARDS

The AC User Consultants feel strongly that incentives for promoting good work, as well as acknowledgement of a job well done, are extremely important in motivating computer lab consultants to excel at their duties. One area in which the AC User Consultants have found incentives extremely useful is in the required training process. For example, lab consultants who complete one of the six Custom Guide books, which cover such topics as Word and PowerPoint, will receive a certificate of achievement over the particular book in question. In addition, those that were in compliance for each month for the training materials at the end of each trimester are placed in a drawing for such things as free movie passes at the local movie theater. The AC User Consultants also have a high achiever award for training; the student consultant who completed the most training chapters during each trimester receives a prize such as a free movie pass. Besides these incentives, the AC User Consultants give out Good Egg Award certificates and goodie bags in acknowledgement of commitment to quality job performance.

Besides internal rewards, the AC Computer Lab Consultants have been given a reward outside of the Academic Computing Department. During the 2003 Student Employment Recognition Ceremony, the AC Computer Lab Consultant team was awarded the Northwest Missouri State University Student Employment Outstanding Team award. The nominees for the award are evaluated based upon quality of service, reliability, initiative, professionalism, and quality of work. The Outstanding Team is awarded a traveling trophy and each of the team members is given a certificate to commemorate the accomplishment.

7. ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Beyond training and other rewards, the AC User Consultants offer two additional opportunities for the Student Computer Lab Consultants to improve and broaden their skills, as well as earn some additional income. The first opportunity is to conduct freshman computer training at the beginning of each fall trimester. The second opportunity is to help with the maintenance of the library computer labs during the breaks between trimesters.

7.1 FRESHMAN TRAINING

At the start of every fall trimester, the Academic Computing Department provides computer training to incoming freshmen. The two-day event, which is a part of Northwest's Advantage Week, allows new students the opportunity to gain insight into Northwest's information technology resources. Freshman Computer Training is conducted by the AC Computer Lab Consultants under the direction of the AC User Consultants. The training sessions are about 45 minutes in length and run from around 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. each day. The lab consultants not only get paid for conducting the training sessions, but this provides them with a wonderful instructional learning experience and allows new students to become familiar with the faces who will be assisting them with their computing needs within the library computer labs.

7.2 LAB MAINTENANCE

During breaks between trimesters, the AC User Consultants provide the opportunity for their computer lab consultants to gain extra income by assisting in the maintenance of the computer labs. Assisting in the maintenance of the labs gives the computer lab consultants valuable insight into the hardware side of the job by allowing them to learn how to Ghost software onto removable hard-drives and to learn the proper way to clean the lab equipment. Additionally, when cleaning the dust from the insides of the computers, the lab consultants also get an opportunity to see the insides of a computer as well as learn how to disconnect and connect the various peripheral devices such as keyboards, monitors, mice, and sound cords.

8. CONCLUSION

As more students continue to embrace technology and more faculty begin to incorporate computers into their curriculum, university public computer labs are rapidly changing from specialized centers of select learning into hubs of educational diversity where students from a broad range of fields of study can pursue their educational and professional goals. With this growing need for more general-purpose computer labs, there is also the need for the "general-purpose consultant"—meaning a consultant who has a good, basic knowledge of the software most students would need to use for their coursework, as well as the skill to talk with a student in need, not talk down to or over the head of said student. Therefore, it is unwise for student computer lab consultants to be pulled strictly from the ranks of the Computer Science Department. Supervisors should always keep in mind the motto "Tech-NO-Nerds" when considering hiring students to fill public campus computer lab positions.